DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 014 CS 204 692

AUTHOR Pedersen, Elray L.
TITLE Prospects for Sentence-Combining.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 8p.; Study prepared at Weber State College

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Language Arts; Language Development; *Language Experience Approach; Language Fluency; *Sentence Combining; *Teacher Behavior; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Maintaining that sentence-combining language experience is the single most beneficial tool currently available to improve student writing, this paper speculates about the value and effects of the adoption of the language experience approach across the English curriculum. It presents six tasks that need to be undertaken by teachers, researchers, and publishers: developing many different kinds of language experiences to meet the needs of many different kinds of students; working toward widespread adoption of language experience materials and exercises; placing special empnasis on developing language experiences that immerse writers in prewriting, writing, and rewriting stages of the composing process; engaging in full-scale overexposure of students to language experience materials; developing syntactic maturity materials through materials and methods used in English as a second language programs; and understanding student thought processes as they are affected by language experiences. (TJ)

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PROSPECTS FOR SENTENCE-COMBINING

Elray L. Pedersen
Weber State College (Ogden, Utah)

Consistently during the past decade research has demonstrated that time spent using and manipulating language improves student writing much more than does time spent formally studying and analyzing language. (A dozen exemplary studies include: Raub, 1966; Ney, 1966; Miller and Ney, 1968; Mellon, 1969; Vitale and others, 1971; Obenchain, 1971; Fisher, 1973; O'Hare, 1973; Perron, 1974; Combs, 1975; Combs, 1977; Pedersen, 1977; Callahan, 1977; Sullivan, 1977; Stewart, 1978; and Daiker, Kerek and Morenberg, 1978.)

Since the findings of these studies speak well for themselves, it is not necessary to review what accumulated research into the effects of practicing sentence-combining has established to date. It is necessary, however, to keep clearly in mind what the significance of all this research is. We must keep in mind Charles Cooper's conclusion in the December 1975 English Journal (pp. 72-4) that sentence-combining language experience repeatedly has been demonstrated to be the single-most beneficial tool currently available to improve student writing.

This paper attempts to go beyond the accumulated research data that has led to this conclusion and proceeds to speculate about the value and effects of forms of language experience being adopted broadly across the English curriculum. Perhaps speculating about such things can be potentially profitable. It is possible that most of the ultimate purpose of this national conference on sentence-combining and writing improvement ought to be directed at the question, "Where are we going from here?"--not, "What are we doing here?" "What are we going to do with this here-and-now, single-most valuable tool to improve student writing?" "What are the prospects of the language experience approach for improving the language fluency and writing qualities of tommorrow's students?"

Some immediate work to be done by teachers, researchers, and publishers is sketched out in the six following job descriptions. First, we must labor vigorously to develop many different kinds of language experiences for the many kinds of students who can benefit from practicing them. For example, oral exercises for use in pre-school, kindergarten, and early grades must be made available, aimed at expanding early childhood language. Oral and written exercises enlarging upon the models of Cooper (1973), O'Hare (1973) and Strong (1973) must be developed and tested for use in the public schools, grades three to twelve. Efficiently-administered and easily-scored diagnostic testing devices, such as Hunt's " luminum Passage" (Hunt, 1970), must be constructed and tested for general usefulness. In addition, oral and written materials addressing the needs of special education children, English as a Second Language students, and various ethnic group students must be developed. Signalled exercises for deaf students are needed.

That language experiences stimulate long-lasting growth in syntactic fluency, improvement in overall quality of writing, and development of perceived attributes of student writing are concepts only recently

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suggested and supported by research. But applied language experience-exercises in capitalization, in punctuation, in spelling, in vocabulary, in idiom and in style have not been effectively developed or exploited yet. The list goes on. Exercises in eliminating student wordiness and influencing student conceptualization processes are needed. Materials aimed at assessing the value of sentence-combining exercises to perform corrective functions--to eliminate errors from student writing--need to be developed and tested for their usefulness.

Simple processes and manipulations in syntactic fluency still offer numerous possibilities for development and expansion of curricular materials. For example, converting the simple assertion, "It would be a pleasure to see all of us work on developing materials for sentence-combining curriculum," is easily converted to the exclamation, "What would I not give to see all of us work on a sentence-combining curriculum!" Further, once students have made complex sentences from simple ones, they should be able to reduce sentences with adverb clauses in them to simple sentences with simple modifiers in them as in, "Bill was pushing this sentence-combining stuff wherever he could find a handler," to "Bill was pushing his business in every possible direction."

Briefly, the justification for developing many different kinds of language experiences for many kinds of students hinges upon the fact that there is little value in using formal language study to improve student writing other than to be able to identify and talk about elements of compositions (Braddock, 1963; Meckel, 1963; Burton, 1973). On the other hand, research into writing improvement reports several positive, enduring effects associated with sentence-combining practice. If these conclusions are correct, then traditional teachers of writing are in some ways analagous to driver education teachers who teach effective freeway driving skills mostly by naming and analyzing the parts and the functions of the parts of cars, but who fail all the while to accompany the students through actual driving situations demanding appropriate and effective guidance and responses.

Supporting this descriptive analogy is the fact that traditional views about writing and the teaching of writing have been shifting in recent years. In a modern context, the term writing has been defined as extending ". . . the mind's action (through and in language) as it experiences, internalizes, feels, recalls, sorts, packages, and refines thought and experience." As with today's definition of writing, today's assumptions about writing depart from past assumptions. Today's assumptions are that writing is a process, not just a product; that the writing process itself is more synthetic than analytic; that effective writing is more a function of creativity than a measure of correctness; that effective writing involves literacy, not literature; and that producing effective writing relates more to experiencing, using and doing something with and in language than it does to segmenting language and talking about its functions and parts. These definitions and views reflect critical shifts in current as opposed to past thinking about writing. They foreshadow the fact that when people's views of and assumptions about something change, so will the methods they use to attack their problems. Thus, success in using sentence-combining to improve student writing, not the failure of traditional approaches, is spawning new approaches to teaching the composition process.

The second labor that must be performed is that widespread adoption of language experience materials and exercises must be achieved broadly across the language arts curriculum. But formal grammar approaches to the teaching of writing can not be enriched or replaced in the writing curriculum until appropriate, tested materials are available to fill the present void. We must first, then, develop and expand language materials that work everywhere in the English curriculum, including under rigorous test situations. Second, we must disseminate these materials once they exist.

Third, we can resolve here to place special emphasis upon developing language experiences that immerse would-be writers in the pre-writing, writing, and re-writing stages of the composing process. In this context the terms sentence-combining or sentence-building exercises would suggest a broader, more inclusive term, language experience exercises.

Until recently the term sentence-combining has been defined too narrowly. These language experiences have been viewed as "finger exercises," in the sense that they coordinate, habituate and make fluent syntactic manipulations. They have been viewed as "rewriting exercises" in the sense that they involve the collapsing, rearranging, adding and deleting of ideas and structures in student writing. Sentence-combining exercises have been called "stylistic exercises" in the sense that they expose students to a wide range of choices among words and sentence structures. They have been called forms of "syntactic calisthenics"in the sense that they give students daily exercise in increasing the strength and fluency of their syntactic manipulations. But sentence-combining, until recently, has not been viewed in the more general context of its being only one of several kinds of language experience.

In this broader view, language experience, or sentence-combining exercises as they have been known, play a highly important role in the English curriculum. Instead of being defined as limited, a-rhetorical pedagogical tools as early defined by Mellon (1969), language experience exercises today are being viewed as fundamental to the entire pre-writing, writing, and rewriting stages of composition, and as basic to the general development of reading, writing, listening, speaking and thinking activities of students. The pioneering results of Daiker, Kerek and Morenberg (1978) are noteworthy in regards to language experience related to writing. This study supports the view that language experience is the threshold, the means of entering into and exiting out of our thoughts and experiences regardless of which segment of the writing process we might find ourselves most heavily involved in at a particular time. This study also suggests that general and specific types of language experiences can and ought to be constructed to enhance writer fluency in pre-writing, writing and rewriting processes. In all of the exercises, in every segment of the writing process, writers will be expected to practice and do something with language, not just know about it.

Forms of language experience related to the pre-writing process might include, but are not limited to, practicing forms of analogy (the extended, the natural, the unnatural, the personal and the fantasy); practicing oppositioning (making the familiar strange and the strange familiar); engaging in brainstorming, free association and meditation; and practicing systematic analysis.

Forms of language experience related to the writing process might include, but are not limited to, practicing organization; practicing elements of major modes of discourse; practicing voice and audience implications; practicing using levels of usage; practicing the development of a personal style; and practicing a wide range of syntactic fluency materials.

Forms of language experience related to the rewriting process might include, but are not limited to, applied practice in grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and diction--these areas are the major focus and domain of traditional writing courses; revising words, sentences and concepts; stating central ideas, achieving insights and increasing effectiveness of expression. This area might also include practicing connotative and denotative language, practicing coordination, subordination, parallel structure, variety and emphasis; using the ladder of abstraction; and developing subordinate and superordinate categories for concepts.

These are some possibilities. Obviously all elements of the writing process can be approached under the umbrella of language experience. The list given here is simply illustrative.

The next job to do is this. After many types of language experience materials are available, we ought to engage in a full-scale "over exposure" of students to them. This suggestion assumes that the immersion of students in language experiences must be complete, extended baptism, not a token sprinkling. Granted that Moffett (1968), Christensen (1968) and Cazden (1972) have cautioned against too much sentence-combining practice because, it is suggested, ineffective, involved, bloated student sentences might result. How often have teachers of writing in the past been plagued by too much of a good thing? Too much fluency? Too many details? Too much maturity and conceptualization? Can language ever be over experienced?

Profound, extended and extensive exposure to various forms of language experiences can bring about syntactic fluency that in Moffet's own words ". . . must grow rank . . ." (p. 172) before it can be pruned. What a desirable task it would be if future teachers of writing had to prune healthy, vigorous linguistic growth in student writing instead of trying to grow it. Moreover, through over-emphasizing language experiences in the curriculum, critical values and enduring effects of the treatment can be observed, measured, evaluated and modified as desirable.

Another area of work to do relates to English as a Second Language instruction. Conditioning of speaking and writing habits is acquired through exposure to natural language in native environment. Language materials and methods currently available in English as a Second Language programs could prove useful as models for developing syntactic fluency materials. A few methods that condition speaking and writing habits that could prove useful include, for example, cue cards with words printed on them with WHO or WHAT to evoke subjects and objects from students. The numbers 1 and 2 evoke singular and plural forms. Tense is manipulated by using the words YESTERDAY, TODAY, and TOMORROW (instead of past, present and future); negative structures by NO or NOT, etc. It is obvious that cue cards, pictures and other aids would enrich language experiences, exercises and activities, especially for young students.

Finally, attention needs to be directed at not only enhancing but also understanding student thought processes as they are impacted by language experiences. For whatever the reasons, current sentence-combining research shows emphatically that the cognitive performance of students is improved through practice in sentence-combining. Perhaps continued research into this area will produce great insights about the nature and importance of language experience aimed at writing improvement. Also, developing language exercises that explain various semantic relationships between and among sentences will wed syntax and semantics together in student writing.

Where are we going as we leave this conference? Perhaps we will best determine the answers to this question by realizing that the visions of retrospection are more rightly the products of the present than the fruits of the future.

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